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ABSTRACT

Sixteen teachers of preschool handicapped children were assigned to a microcounseling group and 16 to a didactic lecture control group. Microcounseling training included viewing of a parent-teacher videotape model and discussion of appropriate communication skills such as clarification, reflective listening, and dealing with parental resistance to change. Didactic control procedure consisted of discussion on difficult response situations confronting teachers during the initial contact visit. Analysis of pre- and postresponses on a microcounseling interaction scale indicated that the microcounseling group significantly increased the learning of specified teacher response content, compared to the didactic lecture group. Findings suggested that microcounseling offered a more involved learning stimulus that included modeling and demonstration role play as compared to a lecture discussion format. (CL)

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A TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION TRAINING APPROACH

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The interaction between the teacher of a handicapped child and the parent has a significant impact on parent involvement and program support (Mattson, 1977; Tudor, 1977; Waugh, 1978). The development of this working relationship has taken on added importance with the passage of Public Law 94-142 that requires consultation with parents or custodians of children with special or exceptional needs during each stage of the educational process (Barlett & Smith, 1978). In many cases, both parents and teachers lack the necessary interpersonal skills required to communicate productively in such a collaborative fashion (Duff & Swick, 1978). This need for teachers to develop effective communication skills and promote productive climates of interaction has received a great deal of attention in the literature (Aspy, 1969; Carkhuff, 1970; Gazda, 1973; Long, Paradise & Coleman, 1978; Webster, 1977).

Teachers of handicapped children are frequently confronted with difficult questions and other responses from parents during the initial contact visit. If the teacher is unable to manage this communication effectively with the parent, efforts to reach the parent often fail (Hofmeister & Reaves, 1974; Mattson, 1977). This inital session is of great importance as it sets the stage for the parent's participation during assessment, program planning, implimentation and evaluation services (Barlett & Smith, 1978). As a result, the initial contact must be more than a data gathering process. The teacher must also deal with the concerns of the parent and establish a positive relationship for future involvement (Mattson, 1977).

Some of the difficult responses received by teachers from parents of handicapped children involve expressions of guilt (Webster, 1977), questions concerning the child's future (Department of Health, Education and

Welfare, 1974), feelings of anger (Kroth, 1975), denial of limitations (Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1974), disowning of responsibility (Waugh, 1978), expressed tendancies of overprotection (Webster, 1977), and a reluctance to change and try other alternatives to promote educational growth and adjustment in the child (Barlett & Smith, 1978). As a result, the teacher must facilitate an open, trusting system of communication that is vital to good teacher-parent involvement (Waugh, 1978).

Microcounseling techniques have been utilized in teaching communication skills to beginning counselors (Ivey, Normington, Miller, Morill, & Haase, 1968), paraprofessionals (Haase & Dimattia, 1970), and undergraduate students in rehabilitation services (Sawyer & Allen, 1976) and education (Long, Paradise, & Coleman, 1978). Research studies have demonstrated that microcounseling training generalizes from simulation to actual communicative interactions (Ivey, 1971). The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of using the microcounseling model, as compared with a didactic lecture approach, to assist teachers of young handicapped children to respond appropriately to difficult parental responses during the intitial contact with parents.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in the study were a group of preschool teachers participating in an inservice training session on educational planning for young handicapped children. They were randomly assigned to a microcounseling group (n=16) and to a didactic lecture control group (n=16).

Development of Teacher-Parent Model

A teacher-parent communication model was constructed for use with the microcounseling group in the experimental procedure. The following response cues that create difficulty for the teacher during the initial contact were selected from conversations with experienced teachers and the literature (Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1974; Hofmeister & Reavers, 1974; Kroth, 1975; Mattson, 1977; Waugh, 1978; Webster, 1977). These cues included: (1) opening the initial session with the parent, (2) responding to a parents description of overprotection behavior, (3) assisting the parent to consider new alternatives, (4) dealing with a statement concerning denial of limitations, (5) responding to feelings of anger, (6) using open invitations to gain a better understanding of described behavior, (7) dealing with a shift or disowning of responsibility by the parent, (8) responding to a question concerning the child's future, (9) dealing with silence on the parent's part, and (10) closing the session. The teacher-parent model, in the form of a videotape, consisted of these response cues initiated by a parent and coupled with appropriate responses from the teacher. An experienced female teacher and several coached female parents were utilized in constructing the videotape model.

Methodology

Teachers assigned to the microcounseling and didactic lecture procedures participated in training sessions that lasted approximately two hours. Prior to the training sessions, teachers in both groups participated in the pretest procedure in which they were asked to make a written response to each response cue from a parent on an evaluation audiotape. The evaluation audiotape consisted of the same response cues initiated by

parents on the teacher-parent videotape model. In addition, the response cues were described as responses being made by parents of young handicapped children to teachers during the initial contact visit. The nature of the requested response was described as a response they felt was most appropriate to the situation and a three-minute time interval was allowed for the recording of each of these responses. The posttest procedure followed the training sessions and it was conducted in the same manner.

The microcounseling procedure consisted of the microcounseling group initially viewing the parent-teacher videotape model. The group was then involved in a discussion concerning what the teacher model on videotape was trying to accomplish with each response. Similar response cues were roleplayed on a selected basis with some teachers in the microcounseling group. Throughout this discussion, charcteristics of appropriate communication skills were pointed out in the various interactions on the videotape model. Content concerning communication skills with parents included clarification (Egan, 1975), responding to parental guilt and anger (Webster, 1977), reflective listening (Egan, 1975), dealing with parental resistance to change (Barlett & Smith, 1978), and responding to expressed feelings of overprotection, future plans, limitations, and disowning of responsibility. The didactic lecture control procedure consisted of an informational lecture with invited discussion on difficult response situations that confront teachers of handicapped children during the initial contact visit. The same content relative to communication skills previously outlined was presented during the didactic lecture procedure with discussion primarily directed toward questions from the teachers.

Analysis and Results

The results of the two inservice training variations, microcounseling and didactic lecture, were statistically analyzed by a comparison of pre-post responses. To assess this comparison, the pre-post responses of both groups were rated on a microcounseling interaction scale designed for this study. This scale indicated the degree to which the subject's responses corresponded to the desired target responses along a continuum from no intent (1) to very close approximation (6). In order to avoid rater bias, the written responses were coded to conceal the subject's group membership and whether the responses were from pretest or posttest procedures. Response ratings for each subject across all stimulus response situations were totaled with group data being utilized in the statistical comparison.

A two-way analysis of variance was used to evaluate the main and interaction effects of the data and Scheffe's test served to locate the source of significance between separate groups (Huck, Cormier, & Bounds, 1974). The .05 level of significance was adopted for all statistical tests. The means and standard deviations of both groups are sumarized in Table 1 and the results of the analysis of variance are illustrated in Table 2.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

The results indicate that, compared to the didactic lecture group, the microcounseling group significantly increased in the learning of specified teacher response content ($F=62.9$, $p < .01$). The other main

effect (testing period) was also significant beyond the .01 level ($F=82.06$). The results also demonstrate a significant interaction between testing periods and group effects ($F=59.14$, $p<.01$). It was apparent from the data analysis that the groups demonstrated a minimal amount of difference on the pretest while the posttest revealed substantial and significant changes.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrated the effectiveness of utilizing the microcounseling model to assist teachers of young handicapped children to respond appropriately during initial contacts with parents. The two variations of inservice training utilized, microcounseling and didactic lecture, differed significantly in the learning of specified teacher responses to parents who were in the process of presenting difficult response cue situations.

The implications of this study for designing inservice training experiences for teachers in communication skills are apparent. Microcounseling offered the teacher a more involved learning stimulus that included modeling and demonstration role-play as compared to a lecture-discussion format. The observation of a teacher making appropriate responses on videotape coupled with a discussion concerning what the teacher model was trying to accomplish appeared to have a significant impact during the training session. This procedure apparently gave credibility to the specified teacher responses as effective communicative responses to parents who were presenting difficult questions and situations. As a result, the intent of the teacher response received a greater focus of interest by teachers in the inservice training session.

Also, the relevance of the communication skill involved in the interaction appeared to be more meaningful to the microcounseling group. For example, it was apparent that describing the use of open invitations to the teachers was much less effective than allowing the teachers to observe a teacher modeling the skill and experiencing the intent and rationale of the response.

Several recommendations for further research efforts have resulted from the findings of this study. The microcounseling training format needs to be expanded to include several sessions concentrating on additional parental response cues and variations of previous response situations. The investigation would provide additional information on the effectiveness of this training approach and the impact on generalizing from one response cue to a variation of the response situation. Follow-up studies also need to be conducted to compare teachers who have received the microcounseling training with those who experienced the didactic lecture approach. This research should be directed toward their performance in actual contact sessions with parents. If this study were to be replicated and expanded through additional research, it may provide a more realistic reationale to adopt the microcounseling training concept into academic and inservice training for teachers of young handicapped children.

In summary, learning to communicate productively with parents of handicapped children as a professional competency is gaining in importance for teachers due to legislative trends and current education philosophy on parent involvement. Microcounseling appears to be one inservice training approach that will assist teachers in developing thie compentency.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Scores by Groups and Testing Period

Group	Pretest	Posttest
Microcounseling Group N=16		
M	13.68	31.28
SD	1.89	7.94
Didactic Lecture Group N=16		
M	13.43	14.86
SD	1.38	1.48

Table 2

Analysis of Variance: Group Effect and Testing Period

Source	df	MS	F
Testing Period (A)	1	1449.23	82.06*
Group Effects (B)	1	1110.97	62.91*
A x B	1	1044.50	59.14*
Error	60	17.66	

*$p < .01$